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ABSTRACT

Research provides insight into parent attributes that support partnerships with teachers. These attributes include warmth, sensitivity, nurturance, the ability to listen, consistency, positive self-image, personal competence, and effective interpersonal skills. Researchers have cited positive attitudes, continuous teacher training, involvement in professional growth, and personal competence as teacher attributes related to successful parent involvement. Parenting roles that support teacher-parent partnerships include those of learning, supporting, and decision making. Teacher roles critical to the partnership process include support, education, and guidance. Strategies that engage parents and teachers in collaborative roles include home visits, conferences, parent centers, telecommunication, parent involvement in the classroom, participatory decision making, parent education programs, home learning activities, and family-school networking. Family-centered schools need to be involved with families in planning and nurturing healthy environments. A significant part of this effort is the development of a curriculum that promotes a shared learning process among children, parents, and teachers. A family-centered focus must also become a part of the community's fabric. (BC)

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ERIC Digest

EDO-PS-92-12

Teacher-Parent Partnerships

Kevin J. Swick

The partnership construct is based on the premise that collaborating partners have some common basis for action and a sense of mutuality that supports their joint ventures. Teachers and parents have a common need for joining together in partnership: the need to foster positive growth in children and in themselves. It is their challenge to create a sense of mutuality so that their efforts are meaningful to all those involved.

Parent and Teacher Attributes That Promote Partnership

Research provides insight on parent attributes that support meaningful partnerships. These attributes include warmth, sensitivity, nurturance, the ability to listen, consistency, a positive self-image, a sense of efficacy, personal competence, and effective interpersonal skills.

Marital happiness, family harmony, success in prior collaborations, and openness to others' ideas have also been related to parental competence in promoting partnerships (Swick, 1991). Schaefer (1985) has noted that parents who are high in self-esteem are more assertive in their family and school involvement. Not all parents achieve the competence that supports these attributes. Teachers can provide a setting that encourages the development of partnership behaviors in parents. Modeling respect and communication skills, showing a genuine interest in the children, responding constructively to parent concerns, promoting a teamwork philosophy, and being sensitive to parent and family needs are some ways to promote this process. Lawler (1991) suggests that teachers encourage parents to be positive through the example they set in being supportive, responsive, and dependable.

Teacher attributes that appear to positively influence teachers' relationships with children and parents include: warmth, openness, sensitivity, flexibility, reliability, and accessibility (Comer and Haynes, 1991). From the parents' perspective, these teacher characteristics are desirable: trust, warmth, closeness, positive self-image, effective classroom management, child-centeredness, positive discipline, nurturance, and effective teaching skills. Researchers have cited the following teacher attributes as highly related to successful parent involvement: positive attitudes, active planning to involve parents, continuous teacher training, involvement in professional growth, and personal competence (Epstein, 1984; Galinsky, 1990).

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Teacher-Parent Partnership Roles: A Framework

The research on parent involvement indicates that parents and teachers can create viable partnerships by engaging in joint learning activities, supporting each other in their respective roles, carrying out classroom and school improvement activities, conducting collaborative curriculum projects in the classroom, participating together in various decision-making activities, and being advocates for children (Swick, 1991). Integral to these activities are the various parent and teacher roles and behaviors that make for successful partnerships.

Parenting roles are performed within the family and within family-school relationships. Roles critical to family growth are nurturing, teaching, and modeling. Within the larger family-school structure, parents must carry out learning, doing, supporting, and decision-making roles. Naturally, parents use these various roles across contexts, but they emphasize particular roles as family or family-school situations dictate (Schaefer, 1985). For example, recent findings suggest that when parents sense an inviting school climate, they emphasize nurturing and supporting behaviors in their interactions with teachers; their participation in the school environment also increases (Comer and Haynes, 1991).

Teacher roles critical to the partnership process include the family-centered roles of support, education, and guidance. Teacher roles that focus on family involvement in school and classroom activities include those of nurturing, supporting, guiding, and decision-making.

Together, *parents and teachers* can foster their partnership through such behaviors as collaborating, planning, communicating and evaluating (Epstein and Dauber, 1991; Swick, 1991).

A Framework and Strategies: Applications from Research

An action-oriented philosophy of family-school support and nurturance is a powerful force in creating a positive learning environment. Teacher actions that promote such a philosophy include the sensitive involvement of parents from cultural, ethnic, and racial backgrounds (Lightfoot, 1978). Relating classroom activities to the varying needs and interests of children and families is another reflection of a family-centered program.

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Since teacher-parent partnerships are developmental in nature and best realized through a comprehensive approach, a framework for carrying out the process is essential. The following elements need close scrutiny: teacher and parent contexts, role understandings, and an appreciation of the partnership process itself. Further, a sensitivity to each others' needs, situations, and talents is a requisite basis for a viable program.

Given that each program is and should be unique, particular elements, such as the following, are essential: needs assessments, goal statements, prioritization of activities, strategy development, implementation plans, and evaluation tools (Comer and Haynes, 1991). It has been noted that parents, when given the opportunity, are quite active in setting program goals (Powell, 1989). Swick (1992) notes that the availability of teachers and the offering of such services as transportation and child care to parents increases participation in program planning significantly.

A plethora of strategies have proven effective in promoting strong partnerships. The degree to which strategies are related to the needs and interests of parents and to the unique situations of schools and teachers influences the level of success. Home visits, conferences, parent centers, telecommunication, involvement in the classroom, participatory decision-making, parent and adult education programs, home learning activities, and family-school networking are some of the many strategies that have effectively engaged parents and teachers in supportive and collaborative roles (Swick, 1991). Creative uses of technology offer new possibilities for building partnerships with parents that reach beyond traditional limits (Bauch, 1990).

Family-Centered Schools

Early childhood education's commitment to families is strengthened through the partnership process. True collaborative efforts are prompting teachers and parents to plan from a family-centered perspective. Family-centered schools need to be intimately involved with families in planning and nurturing healthy environments. A significant part of this effort is the development of a curriculum for caring that promotes a shared learning process among children, parents, and teachers. This school-family curriculum should focus on the caring elements of self-image, prosocial relationships with others, development of multicultural understandings, sensitive and empathetic relationships, nurturing and positive discipline, and creative problem-solving strategies.

A family-centered focus must also become a part of the community's fabric. A human network of family, school, and community learners needs to be part of a covenant for creating positive human environments. In particular, intergenerational family wellness needs, the family's and the school's needs for learning and sharing, and related community partnership needs provide the foundation for a family-centered effort.

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